
**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION**

Property Address:	740 15th Street, NW	X	Agenda
Landmark/District:	Union Trust Building		Consent Calendar
		X	Concept Review
Meeting Date:	November 29, 2012	X	Alteration
H.P.A. Number:	13-026		New Construction
Staff Reviewer:	Steve Callcott		Demolition
			Subdivision

Architect Tom Jester (Quinn Evans Architects), representing Buck Services DC, LLC, seeks concept review for exterior alterations to the Union Trust building, a landmark that is also within the 15th Street Financial Historic District. The work includes alterations to a window, replacement of a non-original door, installation of a platform over the original basement areaway, signage and exterior lighting. As the property is located within the area subject to the Shipstead-Luce Act, the project is also being reviewed by the Commission of Fine Arts.

Property History and Description

The Union Trust building was constructed in 1906-07, designed by the local firm of Wood, Donn and Deming. In a trend that first emerged in the early decades of the 20th century, the nine-story Neo-Classical Revival building was designed with a grand two-story banking hall on the lower levels and speculative offices on the upper floors to maximize the value of the property with rental income. The building was substantially expanded in 1927 with an addition extending to the west on H Street; the ground level of the addition is distinguishable from the original portion while the upper floors seamlessly continued the building's monumental colonnade.

Stylistically, the Union Trust building is an excellent example of the academic classicism and that was inspired by the City Beautiful Movement at the turn of the 20th century. The Riggs Bank (1899) and the American Security Trust (1904), both at the corner of 15th and Pennsylvania Avenue, are recognized as the first banks in the Neo-Classical tradition in Washington, which themselves took their design cues from the adjacent Treasury Building. Union Trust is also an excellent of the temple form that many of these new classical banks took, with grand banking halls set within relatively solid first floors, surmounted by colossal order classical columns.

Proposal

The project calls for converting the first floor to a restaurant, with entrance through the existing corner doors at 15th and H Streets. A vertical sign would be hung north of the door on the 15th Street elevation lit by a gooseneck down light, and a small menu sign would be mounted on the H Street elevation. Open-sided fabric shed awnings would be hung above three of the five windows on 15th Street and two of the windows on H Street. The non-original brass doors opening to the building's lobby would be replaced with glass doors surmounted by a glass transom.

A steel platform is proposed to be constructed over the areaway to the height of the first floor window niches in order to create access to seating areas within the niches. One of the existing windows would be converted to a service door for wait staff to access the raised terrace and a seating area at the sidewalk grade in public space. The window alteration would result in removal of a metal-framed window and panel below, replaced with a single leaf glass door. The original security bar over the window would be retained and hinged to allow it to swing open when the door was in use and closed after hours. As the steel areaway landing would include a short run of stairs down to the sidewalk and be more than 30 inches above grade immediately outside the new service door, a combination glass handrail/guardrail is proposed.

Evaluation and Recommendations

One of the architectural characteristics of banks from this period is that they were typically designed to be imposing, solid and vault-like on their first floors in order to convey the appropriate sense of security. Unlike a retail building, which outwardly expresses itself through the copious use of plate glass windows, glass doors and projections, the focus of the grand Beaux-Arts banking halls was inward. Accordingly, one of the challenges of converting this type of building to a more open, retail or restaurant use is providing an outward expression of that new use.

The submission has been developed in an effort to respect the exterior character of the building while also attempting to signal a more open, animated use within and bridge the separation between the two. The alterations have been developed to be reversible without damage to important character-defining features. The awnings would be installed in a manner that does not alter, damage or conceal the distinctive bronze window surrounds, and the steel platform would not alter the granite areaway walls or building façade. While the alteration of the one window to a door will result in the removal of an original window and the panel below, the more distinctive exterior ironwork that defines the appearance of the opening will be retained.

The most apparent aspect of the project will be the guardrail on the portion of the platform immediately outside the new service door. However, a relatively short run of a transparent glass railing will have a modest visual impact on a building of this size and monumentality. While the base of the building is currently austere, the addition of outdoor seating (and any associated removable planters and umbrellas), together with the new awnings, will add life and visual stimulus to the base of the building that will easily absorb the visual impact of the new railing.

As a minor suggestion, an alternative light fixture for the new vertical sign should be considered. While goose-neck can be compatible for a retail building, they don't have the appropriate design qualities, character or finish for a high-style Beaux-Arts building.

Recommendations

The HPO recommends that the Review Board find the concept consistent with the purposes of the preservation act and delegate final approval to staff.